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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ALGIERS 001973

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [AG](#)

SUBJECT: ALGERIA POISED FOR POSITIVE REFERENDUM VOTE ON
NATIONAL RECONCILIATION

REF: A. ALGIERS 1810

[1](#)B. ALGIERS 1702

[1](#)C. ALGIERS 1661

Classified By: Ambassador Richard W. Erdman-reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) In the leadup to the September 29 referendum on President Bouteflika's proposed Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation, the GOA has pulled out all the stops to assure a sizable turnout and overwhelming "yes" vote. From Bouteflika on down, the entire senior leadership has barnstormed the country, presenting the Charter as the sine qua non of stability and economic development and, not coincidentally, announcing large public works projects at almost every stop. While there is some dissension within the official ranks, public opposition from some press and urban political elites, and some concern about abstention rates, non-Berber parties across the political spectrum have all endorsed the national reconciliation project and there is a wall-to-wall expectation that the referendum will pass with a comfortable majority. We recommend the Department issue a measured public statement, once the results are officially announced, that registers some concerns while avoiding counterproductive direct criticism, and that focuses on shaping the key next steps implementing the national reconciliation process. See para 8 for proposed guidance. (End Summary)

THE PRO-CHARTER JUGGERNAUT ROLLS ON

[1](#)2. (C) In the leadup to the September 29 referendum on President Bouteflika's Charter on Peace and National Reconciliation (reftels), the GOA has pulled out all the stops to mobilize a sizable turnout and overwhelming "yes" vote. Bouteflika and his ministers have continued to scour the countryside with pro-Charter campaign messages, announcing new government projects at each stop and portraying the Charter as key to definitively turning the page on terror and opening a new era of rapid economic development. Portraying the charter as a logical progression from the "rahma" (clemency) and Civil Concord policies of the late 1990s, the leadership has presented the Charter as a broad political mandate for up to twenty implementing laws, as the maximum the current balance of internal forces will sustain, and as a uniquely Algerian solution to an Algerian problem. With a notable lack of specificity, the leadership has also maintained that "peace and national reconciliation" does not mean impunity from justice. Finally, having fought its war of liberation alone and then been shunned as it successfully defeated terrorism at home without outside help, Bouteflika and others in the leadership have pointedly argued that Algeria does not need outside advice or models on how to pursue national reconciliation.

BROAD POLITICAL ENDORSEMENTS

[1](#)3. (C) State television and radio have meanwhile kept up a drumbeat of pro-Charter messages, carefully keeping dissenting opinion out of the public media. The official military magazine "Djeich" has urged military personnel to vote for the Charter (which, though little discussed, would provide broad immunity for security personnel linked to disappearances). The presidential coalition parties (FLN, Democratic National Rally, and moderate Islamic Movement for a Society of Peace), a smattering of smaller non-Berber based parties, including the Trotskyist Worker's Party and the more hard core Islamic Islah, have all called for a positive vote on the Charter, as have the major national labor federation and an array of pro-Bouteflika social and civic organizations. Even some leaders of the banned Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), contacted by Minister of State Belkhadem in London, have endorsed the Charter, despite Bouteflika's and the Charter's clear position that the FIS would continued to be banned from political activity. (Except of course, endorsing the Charter!)

ALONG WITH SOME INTERNAL DISCORD

14. (C) While the government has been mostly on-message, there have been some signs of internal discord over the referendum as well as dissenting voices in public. Prime Minister Ouyahia, traditionally known as an "eradicationist" hard-liner against terrorists, and Belkhadem, who has barely disguised his desire to replace Ouyahia as Prime Minister, have publicly disagreed over whether the charter would be a final step or an interim step toward a full general amnesty. There has also been contradictory rhetoric about whether reconciliation entails forgiveness or essentially forgetting and moving on. Beyond these discordant notes, Bouteflika has also publicly railed against unnamed municipal officials, "functionaries", and others even in the "heart of the administration" who have opposed the Charter. In this regard, one minister and the wife of another privately confided to the Ambassador that the Charter was "a gamble."
AND CRITICAL VOICES AMONG PRESS AND POLITICAL ELITES

15. (C) Several widely read dailies -- especially El-Watan, Liberte, and Quotidien d' Oran -- have raised searching questions about aspects of the Charter in their commentaries. They have also increasingly featured thoughtful criticisms from prominent personalities, including former PM Reda Malek, Ait Ahmed (the self-exiled head of the Berber-based Socialist Forces Front party), Said Saadi (leader of the small, Berber-based RCD party), well-known human rights activists, academics, and former senior officials. Significant elements of the political class have also become increasingly if still privately negative about the referendum, expressing concern over the lack of real debate in the public media, cynicism over the possibility of voting manipulation should the results fall short of the desired "yes" mandate, and unease that the real goal of the national reconciliation project is to consolidate Bouteflika's political position and pave the way for constitutional amendments permitting a third presidential term.

ABSTENTIONS A CONCERN BUT MANAGEABLE -----

16. (C) While few doubt the outcome of the referendum, government officials like Belkhadem have publicly expressed concern about voter turnout -- in part because of widespread perceptions that the outcome is a foregone conclusion and voting will thus not make much difference. One disturbing reflection of this concern has been reported instances of police detentions of anti-referendum activists distributing leaflets calling for boycotting the referendum. While views differ over expected voter turnout, most contacts agree it will be lower in urban centers like Algiers and in the restive Kabylie, the only place during his nation-wide pro-Charter campaign where Bouteflika encountered significant public dissent concerning the Charter. Belkhadem has publicly spoken about an 80 per cent turnout. Some National Assembly deputies have privately commented to us that the referendum would pass by a large margin but with an abstention rate of 35 per cent. An abstention rate over 40 per cent would be a setback for Bouteflika, these deputies said. And a senator from a presidential coalition party claimed the inner circle feared the abstention rate could reach 50 per cent.

MANY AVERAGE ALGERIANS GENUINELY READY TO PARDON -----

17. (C) All this said, the GOA has the means -- and certainly the political will -- to mobilize a fairly high turnout, particularly outside the major urban centers. In addition, many average Algerians, including many of our non-GOA Embassy contacts who have lost friends and family to terrorism, are simply weary from over a decade of terrorism. Acting out of a sense of patriotism and a genuine willingness to forgive despite all that has happened, they are willing to hope the Charter will deliver as promised and to give Bouteflika, who can claim a solid record of accomplishment and improved security and economic growth since coming to office in 1999, the benefit of the doubt in charting the best course ahead.

SUGGESTED PRESS GUIDANCE -----

18. (C). In reacting to the September 29 referendum results, we recommend we aim for a measured response that avoids a rush to judgment, that registers some concerns while avoiding counterproductive, direct criticism, and that is forward-looking and focused on shaping the key next steps implementing the reconciliation process. Just as in our approach to democratization in the Muslim world, we believe we should not insist on a one-size-fits-all approach to reconciliation, but allow some room for an approach that reflects the uniquely Algerian aspects of this painful national tragedy, Algeria's Islamic traditions, and the fact that this is the first major case of a Muslim-Muslim national reconciliation process.

19. (SBU) We suggest the Department issue a press statement along the following lines, once the results of the referendum have been officially announced:

--We have closely followed the referendum debate in Algeria concerning President Bouteflika's proposed Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation, just as we have followed the efforts of other countries which have sought to turn the page on painful episodes in their history through a process of reconciliation.

-- While a full airing of views on this vital issue in the public media would have been welcome, the Algerian people have freely voted to support the Charter by a solid majority.

-- We respect their decision and wish the Algerian people and the Algerian government well, as they seek to move forward within a framework of justice and rule of law to achieve genuine peace and national reconciliation.

-- In this regard, we note that in presenting the Charter to the Algerian public, Algerian leaders have assured on various occasions that the Charter does not involve impunity from justice.

-- We look forward to the implementing legislation that will enshrine this important principle, which other countries have found essential to the success of their reconciliation efforts.

ERDMAN